

JAN 27 2009

January 22, 2009

Ravalli County Commissioners

Dear County Commissioners,

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I read ICAARE's opinion expressed in the Ravalli Republic article of Jan 22nd with interest.

My father, Alden Lohrke, like many native Montanans, grew up elsewhere, had not visited the Bitterroot Valley until after starting his 30-year career as a commercial pilot. From his first visit, Dad loved the pristine quality and beauty of the valley and the people. He met many retired pilots in this area, and heard stories about others too numerous to name. The airport had its flaws, as all smaller ones do, but the combination of the Bitterroot and the promise of camaraderie with pilots and their families was strong attraction for the Bitterroot to be his retirement home.

Dad was so convinced that the Bitterroot existed nowhere else in the world that in 1963 he purchased 40 acres on the west side above Hamilton. In the intervening time, my mother passed away and he hesitated going to the west side 40 for sentimental reasons. He still wanted to be where private pilots were plentiful and quiet beauty surrounded the airport. Although he continued to own the west side 40, Dad remarried and purchased 6 acres on the eastside where he built a home. He passed away in 2003 a happy pilot.

My fondest memory of him, as a pilot, was an opportunity he had at this airport. He thought this unique to no other small American airport that he had found, having flown his plane over/into 42 states with landings in capitols as well as other smaller fields. He and several older pilots would park their recliners on the concrete floor, set up a table and cooler, turn on the band radio, open the hanger door and relax together. They told stories from their pasts, watched the planes take off and land, and listened to the pilots talk with the tower. As the years went by, some pilots would go fly with God and other pilots would come sit with them. These pilots were not only recliner fliers, they owned airplanes, some built their own experimental craft, and they flew them actively.

The amazing thing to me is that Dad kept a valid flying license until into his 80s. There are many pilots retired in the valley of this vintage and similar, who have kept their health and continue to pass the rigorous physical/medical exam to keep their licenses.

Your opportunity, as a county board in my opinion, is to recognize value improving the airport, yet to do so is not the gradual slide into massive transport service. Folks who have enough money to own, maintain, employ pilots to fly private jets probably have the resources to sustain the 40-mile trip from Missoula to their homes comfortably even in "miserable" weather. Secondly, recognize the international appeal in being a better private pilot's airport. Private pilots are busy flying as much as they can. They fly solo, with their families, in competition with others, and simply revel in all things aviation. Smaller jets can get in here. Remember what they sound like when they do come in. Any bigger flying craft (other than a balloon) will simply be bigger noise.

Smaller craft are not without their distinct sounds, but don't you think that sound is pleasant? And wouldn't it be a shame to completely lose that small airport feel?

Regarding noise, I would like to alert you to a worrisome memory of Dad's flying career – 'noise abatement'. Noise abatement had to be performed by the pilot upon take off in cities. Just when the big jet was leaving the tarmac, in it's steep incline, at a certain low altitude, the pilot was mandated by law to pull back on the throttle so as not to rattle the dishes in people's cupboard a few hundred feet below the plane. It was one of my Dad's nightmares. It was difficult to do, something none of the men and women sitting in the pilot's seat got used to. It was scary and risky for sudden stall and crash. But it kept the cups below quiet. It kept the FAA regulators happy.

The noise from a bigger jet is significant on the ground. No one in any article in the paper so far has exaggerated the noise factor. Let me be a voice to say noise on the ground from larger jet aircraft is massive. Do not be hesitant to regard noise as a far-reaching consequence for all of us.

The noise busts eardrums, goes off the decibel scale, makes a person's breast bone thud 3 miles away, causes 'noise abatement' sound barriers to go up 20 feet high and wider on both ends of the run way. Can you imagine a small private plane caught in that mousetrap? Student pilots would be discouraged as would any private pilot a little shy because of a microburst out of the west. Pilots know the noise is bad on the ground, but a crashed plane with passengers is a heavier penalty. The line between disaster and lesser decibels is narrower than the general public realize. We don't want our county airport caught in anything even close to this scenario. However, change is inevitable.

Expansion needs to be done for all the pilots anyway. The taxi way does need more distance from the runway. Continued FAA support means county citizens won't have to pay back the FAA share contributed to the airport since 1946 if we did lose it. That's probably over \$20 million even at 90%, a big tax burden we'd have to pay, if we did something that would stop the FAA's support. It makes sense to accept the \$2 mil improvement burden, since 90% of that is covered by the FAA and Montana State aviation board, just like the airport's yearly funding has been since 1946.

I talked to a retired pilot recently who thought the pilots using the airport paying their aviation fuel tax each time they fill up could cover the cost of the 10% Ravalli County share of the \$2 million in a year.

Thank you for your time. I tried to keep this letter one page. God Bless you all.



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